DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 456 671 FL 026 922

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TITLE What We Can Learn from Foreign Language Teaching in Other Countries. ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION ERIC Clearinghouse on Languages and Linguistics, Washington, DC.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO EDO-FL-01-06
PUB DATE 2001-09-00
NOTE 4p.; Based on "Foreign Language Teaching: What the United States Can Learn from Other Countries" (December 2000).
CONTRACT ED-99-CO-0008
AVAILABLE FROM ERIC Clearinghouse on Languages and Linguistics, 4646 40th Street, NW, Washington, DC 20016. Tel: 202-362-0700; For full text: http://www.cal.org/ericcll/digest.
PUB TYPE ERIC Publications (071) -- ERIC Digests in Full Text (073)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Educational Policy; *Educational Technology; Elementary Secondary Education; *Foreign Countries; Heritage Education; Language Maintenance; Language Tests; Second Language Instruction; Second Language Learning; Student Evaluation; *Teacher Education; *Teaching Methods
IDENTIFIERS ERIC Digests

ABSTRACT

During the last decade, new efforts have aimed at improving foreign language education in the United States. A recent study concerned with the need to strengthen foreign language skills among U.S. students examined the successes of other countries. Conducted by the Center for Applied Linguistics, the study collected information from 22 educators in 19 countries about foreign language instruction in their elementary and secondary schools. The countries represented in the study are Australia, Austria, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Israel, Italy, Kazakhstan, Luxembourg, Morocco, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Peru, Spain, and Thailand. Information was also gathered on China, England, and Hong Kong from comparative education reports. Study participants responded to a series of questions about language teaching methodologies, strategies, and policies in their countries that could inform language teaching in the United States. Answers to the key question, "What do you think are three of the most successful aspects of foreign language education in your country?" allowed study researchers to identify eight exemplary characteristics of foreign language education in the countries surveyed. This digest examines these characteristics and discusses what the United States can learn from them. (VWL)

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ERIC DIGEST

EDO-FL-01-06 • SEPTEMBER 2001

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Introduction

During the last decade, new efforts have aimed at improving foreign language education in the United States (see, e.g., National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project, 1999). A recent study concerned with the need to strengthen foreign language skills among U.S. students examined the successes of other countries. Conducted by the Center for Applied Linguistics, the study collected information from 22 educators in 19 countries about foreign language instruction in their elementary and secondary schools. The countries represented in the study are Australia, Austria, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Israel, Italy, Kazakhstan, Luxembourg, Morocco, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Peru, Spain, and Thailand. Information was also gathered on China, England, and Hong Kong from comparative education reports.

Study participants responded to a series of questions about language teaching methodologies, strategies, and policies in their countries that could inform language teaching in the United States. Answers to the key question, "What do you think are three of the most successful aspects of foreign language education in your country?" allowed study researchers to identify eight exemplary characteristics of foreign language education in the countries surveyed. This digest examines these characteristics and discusses what the United States can learn from them.

What Works in Other Countries

An Early Start

Many respondents reported that beginning foreign language study early promotes achievement of higher levels of language proficiency. Seven of the countries studied have widespread or compulsory education in foreign languages by age 8, and another eight countries introduce foreign languages in the upper elementary grades. In many cases, a second foreign language is offered or required in the elementary grades. This contrasts starkly with the United States, where the majority of students who study a foreign language do not start before age 14.

A Well-Articulated Framework

Several respondents noted the importance of a well-articulated curriculum framework that motivates and guides the development of an effective system of foreign language education. Many European countries have adapted their foreign language teaching at the national level to the frameworks and standards articulated by the Council of Europe's language policy and activities. *Modern Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment. A Common European Framework of Reference* (Council of Europe, 1996), developed and revised over the past decade, has had high impact. The Framework is a planning instrument that provides a common basis and terminology for describing objectives, methods and approaches, skills, practices, and assessments in language teaching, and it is used for planning syllabuses, examinations, teaching materials, and teacher training programs throughout Europe.

Rigorous Teacher Education

One of the most often cited factors related to excellence in foreign language education is a well-trained teaching corps. In Morocco, English teachers are among the best trained teachers in the country. After a 4-year degree in English from a university or teacher training college, including one year of specialization in literature or linguistics, students spend a year studying language teaching methodology and getting practical training.

A crucial factor in teacher quality is the status of the teaching profession, because it directly impacts the quality of candidates who go into teaching. In Finland, potential teachers are recruited from among the best high school graduates. Teaching is a highly valued profession, and admission to universities, where all teacher education takes place, is very competitive. This creates a high degree of selectivity and increases the prestige of a teaching degree.

Pre-service training that integrates academic subject studies with pedagogical studies and teaching practice is considered one of the most successful aspects of foreign language education in several countries. In some countries, including the Netherlands and the United Kingdom, study and work abroad programs contribute to the high level of language proficiency among foreign language teachers.

Comprehensive Use of Technology

Innovative technologies and media are frequently cited as a way to increase access to information and entertainment in a foreign language, provide interaction with speakers of other languages, and improve foreign language teaching in the classroom.

Access to Information and Entertainment. Most respondents, in particular those from Canada, Denmark, and Thailand, highlighted the importance of the Internet and specialized databases for information retrieval. In smaller countries, many television shows are broadcast in a foreign language and subtitled rather than dubbed. In Denmark, where English is omnipresent through the many U.S. and British television programs, films, computer games, and music videos, teachers have developed successful strategies for integrating their students' informal foreign language exposure into classroom teaching.

Interaction and Collaboration With Speakers of Other Languages. Access to information on the World Wide Web and the use of new information technologies, especially networked computers, has contributed to increased communication among foreign language teachers and students in many countries. Through e-mail, mailing lists, discussion groups, and chat rooms, the Internet has increased access to and communication in the foreign language with both native and nonnative speakers.

Effective Teaching Strategies

Respondents mentioned several innovative methods for language instruction, which fall roughly into the categories highlighted below.

Integration of Language and Content Learning. Learning content-area subjects through the medium of a foreign language has become increasingly popular in many of the responding countries. In some cases, a foreign language is used as the medium of instruction in non-language subjects, frequently at the secondary school level when students have acquired sufficient proficiency in the foreign language. In Luxembourg, for example, both German and French are used as a medium of instruction throughout students' school careers to support simultaneous learning of both languages. In immersion programs, called "bilingual programs" in Europe, primary school children are taught subject matter almost exclusively in a second or foreign language.

Communicative Teaching Methods. In Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Peru, and Spain, a focus on communicative and intercultural learning has not only stimulated a productive discussion of teaching objectives, methods, and underlying rationales that are now reflected in curricula and textbooks, but has also resulted in increased oral and written proficiency for their students.

Focus on Language Learning Strategies. Several respondents reported that a recent focus on how to learn a foreign language has been important to the success of language education in their countries. In Denmark, for example, teachers focus on raising students' awareness of various communication strategies, including strategies to bridge vocabulary gaps, reading and listening strategies, and general language learning strategies.

Building on the First or Subsequent Languages. Particularly in bilingual or multilingual countries or in those with a large number of language minori-

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ties, respondents stated that successful approaches consider students' first languages as a foundation upon which to build second language proficiency. In Luxembourg, several projects demonstrate that acknowledging the sociocultural context and the already developed competencies of children in their first language will boost learning of subsequent languages.

Other Successful Methods. Other notable methods include the sole use of the foreign language in the classroom; a modular approach to teaching in which students are grouped according to proficiency level rather than age or grade level; and project-oriented learning that emphasizes the use of authentic materials through technology and integrates learning about English-speaking countries with language and content learning.

Strong Policy

A number of respondents mentioned the importance of policy formulation. Language and education policies at the national, regional, and local levels can facilitate or inhibit strong language education.

Language and Education Policies. In Australia, one of the most successful aspects of foreign language education relates to the National Policy on Languages (NPL) (Lo Bianco, 1987), which provides a framework for language education. The NPL has initiated pluralism in the languages being offered, supported projects for indigenous and first language education, led to policy development in each Australian territory, and resulted in the near-universal introduction of languages at the primary level.

Foreign Languages as Core Subjects. One of the most influential policies with respect to foreign language learning is the status of languages within the school curriculum. In all European countries and in Canada, Kazakhstan, Morocco, and Thailand, at least one foreign language is compulsory for all students.

Assessment

Several of the educators surveyed highlighted assessment as one of the best practices in foreign language education in their country. In most of the countries, nearly all assessment of students' foreign language learning occurs in the context of specific courses, with grades or credit for completion assigned by teachers. The only national or regional examinations that include language proficiency assessments are school-leaving examinations administered at the end of secondary education. In the Netherlands, there are central school-leaving examinations developed by a national testing institute and administered at the end of secondary school. Students attending the pre-university stream take the exam, which includes achievement tests in three foreign languages: English, French, and German. Results account for 50% of the final grade in the subject. A result of these central exams, which are in accordance with the European Framework, is a coherent approach with respect to the curriculum.

In China, the Matriculation English Test (MET) assesses not only grammar and lexis but also their use, thus leading to a decrease of rote memorization in English learning practice (see, e.g., Hamp-Lyons, Hood, Sengupta, Curtis, & Yan, 1999).

Maintenance of Heritage, Regional, and Indigenous Languages

Several respondents described programs that teach the mother tongue of speakers of languages other than the dominant one in their country. These programs contribute to foreign language success by helping maintain existing language resources in a country and by fostering achievement among minority populations. Some of the most successful practices in Canada are found in heritage language programs. The Canadian federal policy of bilingualism is framed within a context of multiculturalism that promotes recognition of the value of languages other than English and French. Several provinces have heritage language programs in their official school curricula.

What the United States Can Learn From This

Start language education early. The United States needs a national commitment to elementary school language teaching for all children. The federal government can provide leadership in developing long-term policies for enhanced teacher training, incentives for school districts to offer early language instruction, and a detailed research agenda.

Learn from others. We need to look outside our borders and learn from the mistakes and successes of other countries. In particular, we need to look to countries like ours that have a single official or national language but that are nonetheless succeeding in developing citizens with bilingual or multilingual proficiency.

Conduct long-term research. The U.S. education system can benefit greatly from the development of a long-term research agenda that incorporates longitudinal studies of a variety of early language learning models of instruction.

Provide stronger leadership. A stronger and more coherent government-wide effort is needed to create the atmosphere and opportunity to improve language education in the United States.

Identify how technology can improve language instruction. A major question remains about how successful technology is in improving foreign language instruction. We need specific research on how technology can best be used to increase students' proficiency in other languages.

Improve teacher education. The United States needs to conduct a more in-depth investigation into how some countries are recruiting high-caliber students into teaching and providing top quality in-service and pre-service training.

Develop appropriate language assessments. The effective assessment practices used in other countries are worth studying given the salience of assessment in U.S. education.

Designate foreign language as a core subject. In districts and schools in the United States where foreign language study is part of the core curriculum, there is a more rigorous approach to curriculum development, professional development, and assessment. Designating foreign language study as a core subject is essential for a successful program.

Take advantage of the sociolinguistic context. American educators need to take advantage of the sociolinguistic context in which we live by promoting the learning of languages spoken by indigenous groups and by immigrants and refugees in this country, as well as by our neighbors in Canada and Mexico.

Conclusion

Compared to students in much of the world, U.S. students lag far behind in their foreign language capabilities. The study discussed in this digest has provided valuable insight into successful foreign language education in other countries. The United States can learn a great deal by studying these successes and using the information to implement practices and policies that will support the development of better foreign language education and a higher level of foreign language proficiency among our citizens.

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This digest is based on the report, *Foreign Language Teaching: What the United States Can Learn from Other Countries* (www.cal.org/ericcll/countries.html), by I. Pufahl, N. C. Rhodes, & D. Christian, published in December 2000 by the ERIC Clearinghouse on Languages and Linguistics, Center for Applied Linguistics, Washington, DC.

This digest was prepared with funding from the U.S. Dept. of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, National Library of Education, under contract no. ED-99-CO-0008. The opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of ED, OERI, or NLE.